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NGOs respond to Parliament's Flood Risk vote

The European Parliament has failed to promote the sustainable management of floods, warned the European Environmental Bureau, Friends of the Earth Europe and WWF. Voting on the Floods Directive in Strasbourg today, Members of the European Parliament stopped short of promoting an approach that works with natural defences like wetlands, floodplains and riverbank woodlands.

MEPs took a step further towards sustainability relative to the Council of Ministers' position, but drew criticism for still condoning the use of man-made concrete structures to constrain flooding. The NGOs warn that persisting with old-fashioned practices of constraining floods with concrete will give rise to ever-worsening impacts on society, the economy and biodiversity.

Missing from the agreed compromise is the obligation for Member States to work with nature. For example, national governments are not required to recreate natural floodplains, or incorporate environmental and resource costs when calculating recovery costs, or fully comply their flood management with the major current piece of EU legislation on water management - the Water Framework Directive, which has as its binding objectives to achieve 'good water status' and 'prevent deterioration' of water bodies.

Perspectives and challenges

The package now agreed by the European Parliament provides for the first time an EU-wide coordinated flood risk management 'cycle', which comprises three regularly-reviewed components: The preliminary flood risk assessment, identification and mapping of flood risk areas (according to probable, less probable and extreme flood event scenarios), as well as flood risk management plans containing measures to reduce the flood risks identified. This management will be entirely carried out in river basins. Parliament did successfully improve the Council's first Common position on various crucial points, most importantly by ensuring a minimum level of coordination on Water Framework Directive implementation. But the Flood Directive's provisions, in the NGOs' view, contain several key shortcomings:

- Two parallel, potentially conflicting, water management processes, including different management units for flood management and implementation of the Water Framework Directive, accompanied by duplication of administrative work: an obstacle to better regulation.

- Uncertainty whether all measures must comply with the binding objectives of the Water Framework Directive to achieve 'good status' and 'no deterioration' of waters by 2015. This is astonishing considering that many old-fashioned flood protection measures, particularly upgrading or building more dykes, polders and dams, will fail to achieve these environmental objectives while also failing to achieve truly sustainable flood management

- Member States can postpone establishment of the 'foreseen risk assessment' and maps until 2018 and beyond if they have compiled the relevant (but not necessarily all the required) works before the end of 2010. The same justification allows management plans to be finalised only in 2021. There are clear indications (eg in Germany) that existing plans will be insufficient.

- The Directive tolerates a risk assessment which does not necessarily adequately consider flood plains, the impacts of climate change or environmental and resource costs of technical measures (eg sunk costs from loss of drinking water sources, biodiversity, recreation facilities)

- Risk mapping does not need to include flood plains or to consider active involvement and all relevant scenarios of flood events (coast, groundwater, areas of regular flooding)

- In the context of the management plans, there is no obligation to prioritise WFD objectives or measures for natural retention. This means it will be too easy to continue with old-fashioned technical measures.

Consequences

Since the Directive will allow the 'business as usual' approach to persist, the risk of damaging floods will escalate in all European river basins, including the Danube, Ebro, Elbe, Meuse, Oder, Rhine and Thames, as the probability of extreme rainfall will further increase. Between 1998 and 2005, Europe suffered over 100 major, damaging floods (43% of all natural disasters in Europe are floods). Most EU countries were affected by flooding at least twice over this period (particularly France, the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria). The Association of British Insurers estimates that the cost of flooding in Europe could increase to 120 billion Euros by 2080 [1].

But the biggest problem is that maintaining the status quo will put implementation of the Water Framework Directive at risk, whereas more sustainable flood-management would support achievement of the directive's objectives. Already over 70% of Europe's surface waters will probably not achieve 'good' status or will not be saved from further deterioration if additional measures are not introduced to better protect water.

Hydromorphological impacts, which arise from technical flood-protection measures, are among the greatest threats to water bodies. Seventy per cent of EU countries are implementing technical measures, but the planning process contains no comprehensive assessment of environmental and resource costs:

- In Germany, where the national Flood Act is very similar to the now-agreed Directive, the federal states are prioritising polders, new or upgraded dykes and dams, although these measures are disproportionately expensive (costing up to €1,500 per metre). In the Elbe river basin, up to 70 times more is spent on technical measures than on natural sound measures. The consequence is that the speed of floods has not been limited as the speed with which high water levels flow downstream is broken by floodplains but not by dyked polders. This brings damage from higher water pressure downstream.
- There is evidence from the Netherlands that technical measures have not been sufficiently effective, and more could be gained with measures such as granting more space to some natural processes.

The agreed compromise means there will be no strict mechanism to stop public money being spent, as application of the 'polluter pays principle' in the agreed text is very weak.

There is also a strong risk of further decline in floodplains and natural water courses and their associated biodiversity, which is very high, often with over 10,000 species. Other social and economic benefits are also at risk: drinking water sources, scenic recreational areas and room for sustainable water and land-use.

Over 80% of natural floodplains have already been eliminated in the Danube, Elbe and Rhine, often due to unsustainable land and water use (like unsustainable navigation, hydropower, intensive agriculture and housing).

The NGOs believe it is now, in the Floods Directive's implementation phase that these major inconsistencies must be corrected. A crucial first step in this respect will be close coordination and integration of the Floods Directive's implementation with ongoing work on implementing the Water Framework Directive.

NOTES:

[1] Source - European Commission: Climate change impacts on the water cycle, resources and quality. Workshop. 25-26 September 2006. Brussels. Scientific and policy report. Brussels 2007. page 100. ISBN 92-79-03314-X

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